

Jail TV: Hillsborough County's Detention Learning Channel

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH the Hillsborough County Court Communications and Technology Services, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office has developed a closed-circuit television channel to provide educational programming for inmates. This exciting and innovative project will also provide informational programming to reach the entire inmate population without additional staff or classroom space.

As far back as the early 1980s, Hillsborough County broadcasted videos across a closed-circuit channel three evenings per week. Content was comprised of movies with PG or PG-13 ratings and educational programs. A public broadcasting license enabled the detention facilities to broadcast these movies lawfully. In addition, regular off-the-air channels enabled inmates to watch entertainment and sports.

In 1995, as more media attention focused on whether offenders should have the privilege of watching television while in jail or prison, Hillsborough County made the decision to restrict inmate viewing to the closed-circuit channel and to the local PBS and university educational channels. Movies were subsequently removed from the weekly

line-up, and educational programming was increased. Each detention facility maintained a rack of VCRs on timers that distributed programming separately within each jail.

However, there were problems with this system. The limited number of VCRs and the length of videotapes limited programming hours; power surges frequently caused malfunctions; and, as the tapes aged, the quality of the broadcasts deteriorated.

Court Communications, an office of the 13th Judicial Circuit Court, began operating video court on a daily basis in the late 1990s at two of Hillsborough County's four detention facilities. The broadband signal originated at the Orient Road Jail and was relayed using video court lines to the downtown courthouse and then back to Morgan Street Jail.

The cooperative partnership between the Sheriff's Office and the courts led to the idea of sending educational programming directly from

the Orient Road facility to the downtown jail. For the first time, two jails located in separate parts of Tampa were receiving the same closed-circuit programming.

As time passed, many of the issues that had previously hampered the original closed-circuit project re-emerged. The equipment purchased in 1989 continued to age, and more frequent breakdowns occurred. There also remained the problem that two of the county's detention facilities received no closed circuit programming because they did not have fiber-optic lines.

Court Communications finished running fiber optic lines to all Hillsborough County detention facilities in early 2000. That fall, the Sheriff's Office had the opportunity to expand its partnership with Court Communications, which contracts with Xerox Business Services to provide all of its multimedia production and audio-visual services. These services include the distribution of programming for the court's Judicial Channel.

Xerox maintains extensive video production and encoding equipment, video file servers with expansive digital storage space, and a staff skilled in graphic and video production set-up. Falling under the umbrella of the court's contract with Xerox, the Detention Department will now fund the cost

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of purchasing videos that will be encoded with a digital signal and distributed across fiber optic lines throughout the four jails. We will also purchase new equipment that converts the digital signal into a broadband signal at the head antenna at each facility.

The enhanced closed-circuit channel has been named Jail TV, the Detention Learning Channel. The channel will broadcast 10 hours a day. It will be seamless, with promos, schedules, and built-in infomercials. All four Hillsborough County Detention Department facilities will receive the same broadcast of high-quality educational and informational programming.

ALL PROGRAMS STORED on the file server will have public performance rights authorized through the appropriate company prior to purchase. Jail TV will begin broadcasting closed-circuit programs in mid-2001.

Jail TV programming will cover:

- Educational, vocational, life and employability skills;
- Health issues;
- Parenting, substance abuse, and domestic violence education; and
- Legal procedures.

In addition, videos will be produced at the jail to highlight internal programs and community aftercare. Community agencies and local busi-

nesses willing to provide employment opportunities and/or services for offenders will be allowed to promote themselves through professionally produced videos.

THE GOAL OF JAIL TV

is to provide positive educational programming that has direct application for jail inmates. These programs are not intended to supplant the many educational and vocational programs, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence counseling, and religious services provided through staff and volunteers. Instead, television programming will serve as an additional means to reach offenders in a positive and cost-efficient manner.

As the Jail TV project progresses, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office will continue to explore opportunities with new partners to provide additional video programming. ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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